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**The Iowa Blind History Archive
History of Blindness in Iowa - Oral History Project
Interview with [Name]
Conducted by [Name]
[Date]
Transcribed by [Name]**

NOTE: Any text included in brackets [] is information that was added by the narrator after reviewing the original transcript. Therefore, this information is not included in the audio version of the interview.

**Jeff Young age 47, Vinton, Iowa
Meredith Ferguson
Iowa Braille and Sight Saving School
5-16-2011**

Meredith Ferguson: I am Meredith Ferguson and I am here with Jeff Young. The date is May 16, 2011. It's just after 10:30 am, and the location of the interview is at the Iowa

Braille and Sight Saving School, in Vinton, Iowa. Before we start, Jeff, could you state your full name and your age?

Jeff Young: My name is Jeffrey Joseph Young and I am 47.

Ferguson: 47 okay. And, where do you currently live?

Young: I live here in Vinton.

Ferguson: Vinton. And, did you grow up here?

Young: Part time. I'm originally from Cedar Rapids. I moved up here as a residential student and then I moved up here to stay when I turned 18.

Ferguson: Okay. What age did you come to the school?

Young: Well, I started when I was five but I was pulled out after nine weeks, because they felt that I wasn't ready. And then I came back in, I believe it was '72, '73 and I stayed until '81. And at that point I had a lot of issues in my life and I dropped out of school and went back later and got my GED.

Ferguson: Okay. Looking back on your education here, do you feel like you learned a good amount of skills?

Young: I think without this place, I probably wouldn't be where I am today. I learned a lot. Mostly, I learned a lot in athletics; I learned a lot in industrial education. There were certain areas that the...It wasn't that the school was lacking in, but the teachers were lacking in, lacking the ability to get through. And, I butted heads a few times with the

teachers. That didn't help out matters any. But overall, I think I got a pretty good education here.

Ferguson: Good. You mentioned athletics and Industrial Ed. What sports did you play or participate in?

Young: I participated in track, and wrestling, and swimming most of the time. My best sport would have been track, and I participated in that up until 1980. I guess, the highlight of that was going to Little Five Tournament, and knowing that I was the only boy on the boy's track team, and still coming in fourth place. By points, I technically beat out the entire Minnesota school.

Ferguson: Nice! What did you run?

Young: Anything my coach asked me to. (Laughter) That's the answer to that, anything.

Ferguson: And, you mentioned Industrial Education, what did that involve?

Young: Basically, the wood working, the skills to use a lot of the power tools that I have seen a lot of blind people that cannot use. I'm one person that feels very confident around any of the power tools; and those basically range from table saws, air tools. And basically, if it's a tool, I feel comfortable around it. And, that was taught to me by a patient teacher with nerves of steel; I have to admit that.

Ferguson: Weren't the easiest student?

Young: What's that?

Ferguson: You weren't the easiest student?

Young: Well, you know, to teach a blind person to use, like, a router or a table saw or something like that; the teacher can tell you to keep these fingers over the fence, so you're not going to cut off your fingers. But, as a blind person you're always going to push that limit by, just moving that thumb out or something. Mark was somebody that had nerves of steel. He'd wait 'till the last minute before you'd hurt yourself and then he'd stop you; just to let you know what you were going to do. And, that was a lesson sometimes hard to learn, but nothing that was permanent.

Ferguson: So, you mentioned that those were two that really kind of changed your life for the better, I guess?

Young: Yeah.

Ferguson: Could you explain how? Is that just in building your confidence?

Young: I think it gave me, yeah, I'll go with the building the confidence, because it gave me, I don't know. To me, those were just skills that I knew some day in life that I was going to have to have. And yet, I knew it took a special teacher to teach them. That, to me, was the neat thing; was those teachers were there to take the time to teach you it, and they didn't get frustrated. I know, back to how bad of a kid I was, what I put those teachers through. And they still stuck

with me. And, that's something that isn't seen in public school.

Ferguson: So, you didn't go through public school at all?

Young: I went through public school from kindergarten through the third grade, and that was, that was a mess. I kind of knew where I was headed there. And that was downhill, and quickly. I had a coach one day from our, I believe, I was probably in Kindergarten or first grade. But, we were out on the blacktop playground and the coach had never taught a blind person before. So, he leads me up to the running area, and he puts my hand down on the stripe of paint that's on the black top and his exact words are, "Do you think you can follow this?" And, you know, as a blind person I look back at that and I think, you know, that's still how they do some of that today in schools.

Ferguson: Wow!

Young: Yes. It was a zoo. It was really, it was really hard to be in public school at that time. I did have an excellent resource teacher. And, I know that she's very well known by the NFB, and that is Dorothy Willoughby; which would have been Curtis's wife. I could not have asked for a better resource teacher at that time, but even with the best resource teacher we lacked a few things.

Ferguson: Such as what?

Young: Such as, the ability to get a lot of the work in on time. The teachers would bring work sheets in and want

you to do them. And, Dorothy would have to Braille them and then I would have to go back, and then later do them; things like that. I guess Dorothy didn't work a whole lot; why am I calling her Dorothy. It's Doris. Oh well, but she didn't work with the coach on any of the gym stuff, so that was completely out.

I didn't care for the public school experience a lot of the time because I was pulled from the class and stuck in a, oh, room that would have been smaller than this, for most of the day. So, public school to me was really a zoo, and really lost. I personally made a choice to come back here, and I don't regret making it; even though things may not have turned out the best.

Ferguson: I should have asked this at the beginning, but what is the cause of your blindness. And, do you have any sight at all?

Young: No, I have no sight at all. The cause of my blindness is Retinoblastoma, and that is genetic. Both of my parents were blind. Both of them attended the school which was very much a benefit to me. And, my mother had Retinoblastoma, her mother had Retinoblastoma, and I believe my great-great-grandmother had Retinoblastoma.

Ferguson: Okay.

Young: And, then my Dad was, actually his blindness was caused by two accidents; one was a rocking chair rocker. His mom was chasing him through the house and he slipped and fell on a rocking chair rocker, which couldn't have been pleasant, that I'm sure of. And, the other one was actually

caused at the school here. He was playing football, and he turned around to look and see where the football was, and they gave it to him right in the eye. So, he lost a second eye up here at the school.

Ferguson: Oh wow. So, you've been blind since birth?

Young: Yeah. I have actually been blind since about two years.

Ferguson: Okay. Did you have any sight at all before that?

Young: I had, I'm told I had good sight before then. I, at that age I don't remember. My only recollection would have been years and years ago, I used to be able to say I remember the color red. And, I can't even say that anymore.

Ferguson: Okay. So, after school what did you, did you get a job?

Young: No, I didn't unfortunately. I had other problems to deal with so I stayed in the community, and just dealt with a lot of problems; a lot of anger issues, a lot of family issues, that type of deal. And, to be very honest, it took me 'till about 18 years ago to get my life straightened out. And, from there we slowly moved forward!

Ferguson: Good! So, do you have any experience, any employment experience? I guess, even just odd jobs?

Young: Yeah, I would say the employment that I've had any experience would have been working at the animal shelter out here.

Ferguson: Okay.

Young: I did a lot of work out there for a while, 'till I crossed the town fathers, again, which seems to be one of my favorite things to do. They told me to turn in my keys. Never took them back, so. (Laughter)

Ferguson: So, what kind of work did you do at the shelter?

Young: I did everything. I was in char...well, I was second in charge of everything from cage cleaning and bleaching, to all the paper work. If an animal came in, we had to log him in. I was an animal handler of all the animals out there. And, it even went so far as I had some decision in what animals were euthanized, and what weren't. Not a fun job when you had to make that selection.

Ferguson: So, I'm not sure how to phrase this any better, but what, how did you do your job even though you were blind?

Young: Really, what helped me out was the person that ran the shelter at that time, was a former student of this school. And, he was very willing to let me put things in Braille to make out different, what do I want to call them, make out different sign in sheets so that we would be able to...so that I would be able to fill them in instead of having the person that just brought the animal in. That way when the animal was brought in, I would fill out the sheet, and I would know

instantly what I had coming in; as to where if they...On the old sheets they'd fill them out, and they'd hand them to me and hand me the animal. And, I couldn't necessarily know what I was getting myself into.

Ferguson: Oh.

Young: He made a lot of changes that way. Physically, I don't think we actually made any changes to the work environment. I would say probably about the only thing we ever made any adjustment to, was he would let me know what was in quarantine and why it was there. And, basically say either deal with it or don't, one of the two. (Laughter)

Ferguson: Did you work with a computer?

Young: I do on my own, now.

Ferguson: How do you do that? Do you...Is it JAWS?

Young: Yeah, I use JAWS 11, I think it is.

Ferguson: Could you explain what JAWS stands for?

Young: Well, I can't explain what it stands for. It's a screen reader.

Ferguson: Okay.

Young: And, it just basically reads everything that the computer puts up on your screen.

15:00

Young: There are several plugins that you probably do need for accessing the web properly, which are Java and ActiveX; standard installs for most people.

Ferguson: Okay, and do you like it?

Young: Yeah. Actually, I like JAWS better than I do Window Eyes, which I've had a little experience with both. And, Window Eyes doesn't give me enough information, so I pretty much enjoy JAWS a whole lot better.

Ferguson: Okay. Kind of sticking with technology, do you have any other devices that you use on a daily basis, or anything that you've used in the past that you either really liked or really didn't like?

Young: Most of what I used in the past has been discontinued. (Laughter) Honestly, but I will have to say that one of the more impressive units that came out years ago that I was impressed with, and even today I would probably buy one up in a heart beat if I could find it, was a sensory device called a Mowat, which was used for travel.

Ferguson: Can you spell that?

Young: I believe it's M-o-w-a-t. And, it was just a little handheld device about the size of a small 35 millimeter camera. It had a laser off the front and you could use it with your cane, or you could use it on its own. And, it would bounce a beam out, and if it found something it would bounce that

beam back and the little unit would shake, and it would increase in intensity as you got closer to whatever you were going to hit. Come in great for higher obstacles which canes obviously don't detect. Actually, I got proficient enough with that unit that I was able to use it to navigate aisles in stores, because it could tell if there's a rack in the middle of an aisle or something like that which was good. That was probably one of my favorite pieces of technology. I'm just now trying to get caught up with some of this other technology that's available. And, probably the reason behind I say I'm just starting to get caught up, is that it's so cost prohibitive; that either you get it or you don't. You don't have a job you might as well kiss it off, because you'll never get it.

Ferguson: Okay. So, before you mentioned you don't have any involvement with any organizations, or such as the alumni organization?

Young: Well, I guess the alumni organization I do; the Alumni Association I do. I am a paid member of that.

Ferguson: Okay. Can you kind of talk a little bit about what that involves?

Young: Well, showing up once in a while to a board meeting and listening in to make sure people aren't doing things wrong; tossing suggestions out there for different events, for the reunion.

Ferguson: Do you have a reunion every year?

Young: We have had. I don't know how long that's going to last, but that's in part because we don't know what's going on with the school. I originally tried to take the foreground in the association, and I was booted back down to where they thought I belonged, and that's okay. I left the association for a year and came back in, and decided that this time around you just got to pick your own battles and not try to fight them all.

Ferguson: Okay, sounds like a wise outlook. (Laughter) What kind of activities or events do you do in your spare time? What do you do to keep active?

Young: I spend a lot of time on the Internet. I'm a HAM radio operator.

Ferguson: A HAM radio operator, okay. Can you talk a little bit about that? How did you get involved with that?

Young: Gosh, years and years, and years ago; about '72, '73. When I first came to school here I had a, there was another student that was here that just impressed me; the thought that he could understand Morris Code, which is just basically dots and dashes, or short and long beeps. And, he just blew me out of the water that he was able to understand that and go so fast. And, he was able to copy it at a rate, about half of what we're speaking now. I mean, he was able to copy anywhere from, I think, probably 30 to 40 words a minute. And, he came to the school and started teaching classes. I guess I have to say some of my social problem was that I'm ADHD, so I mean, I kind of lost track. I

couldn't sit through his classes and stuff like that, but that impressed me.

And, that stuck with me through high school; and it stuck with me even after high school. And, I thought, you know, this is something that I've got to go back and do. So, I went ahead and went back and started studying on my own, and passed the novice test and the technician's test. And, now I'm a general operator, so. But, it requires; it requires you to learn quite a little bit about radio. To me, that's kind of a neat hobby, building my own stuff. That has to do with what I do in my spare time.

Other things I do in my spare time, is my family. We like to all go camping. I spend a lot of time tied up with the Cub Scouts, because I've got a 9-year-old who's going into Webelos this year. So, my wife is the den leader. So, we have our hands full with that.

Ferguson: How are you involved with the Cub Scouts, what do you do?

Young: Pretty much everything. I'm kind of the catch-all. My wife forgets to mention I'm the one that does mention what the assistant forgets to mention, I have to catch up on. Originally I was trained, also, as a leader for Cub Scouts, but the laws basically state that a spouse cannot be a assistant leader, so we had to give that to somebody else. But, I pretty much do all the catch-alls, keep my wife on task when she decided that this hour meeting should run an hour and a half; and I go from there. But, that's basically what we do. (Laughter) We do a lot of different events. They went down to see the Civil War reenactment this year. We've done their hand prints and, you know, a lot of stuff like that in plaster.

And, then they can earn their badges and stuff like that, which is really great. And, it gives my 9-year-old a lot of incentive. Unfortunately, I've got a 16-year-old daughter, who thinks she ought to be a Cub Scout. (Laughter) And, she gets a little upset because Cody gets to do much more than she does. And, well, you know, that's just one of those things. We went through this with her at Girl Scouts, and she decided she didn't want to go any more, so now it's Cody's turn.

Ferguson: So, is your wife sighted?

Young: Yes, my wife is sighted. My daughter has Retinoblastoma. However, we were lucky enough with the advances in cancer treatments, they were able to laser it and kill it. She's got 20/200 vision in her left eye, and she's got about 20/45, I think, in her right eye. And, my son was not affected by it at all. He has no affects from it. And matter of fact, they're basically saying he isn't even a carrier anymore.

Ferguson: Has your blindness ever affected your relationship? I guess, in general, with your family and how? Have you ever run into, I guess, stereotypes or negative attitudes with people?

Young: Family wise, no. I would say one time I ran into it in employment, and that always has stuck with me. Back in high school, when I was still up here, I went to apply for a job. Well actually, I walked in to ask the guy if he had a job open at an ice cream shop. I knew at that point, even, that a lot of the blind people get into the food services and go

with that. And, I was bluntly told, “I wouldn’t hire you if I did have a job. I’m a member of the Lions; I know what blind people can do.” That was really discouraging. I came back and I brought that to the attention of our gym class. At that time our coach stood up for me and he says, “You know a lot of the people go into the field of food services, and that’s something that you could do.” The girls’ gym coach at that time was a former owner of that service, actually, that particular building. And, she popped up with her mouth and said, “You know, I wouldn’t hire you either, because you’re blind,” which is really amazing because she was the girls’ coach, and she didn’t stick around. And, I don’t know how much that has to do with the argument we had, but she didn’t stick around but, maybe, less than a month after that happened.

Ferguson: Do you have anything else you’d like to add; anything that’s triggered your memory that’s come up?

Young: Not that I can think of right off.

Ferguson: Okay. I’ve run through my general list of questions. So, unless there’s anything else you’d like to add, I think we’ll conclude the interview.

Young: All right.

Ferguson: Thank you very much for sitting down and talking with me.

Young: That’s not a problem.

26:44
(End of Recording)

Beverly Tietz
7-29-2011